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SUBJECT: SHIA INDEPENDENT ALI AL-DABAGH ON ELECTIONS, SHIA ALLIANCE, AND SADR

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR MICHAEL J. ADLER, FOR REASONS
1.4 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY. Poloffs met December 1 with TNA member Ali al-Dabagh, a politician who left the United Iraqi Alliance to form his own party, while maintaining his ties to Ayatollah Sistani. Al-Dabagh accused the Shia Alliance of candidate intimidation as well as inappropriate efforts to convey to Iraqis that Sistani has blessed the Alliance list. He said that the Shia Alliance is too pro-Iranian and theocratic. Moqtada Al-Sadr, in al-Dabagh's opinion, "is a reality now" and must be dealt with by the other Iraqi political leaders and the United States. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) Ali Al-Dabagh's "Qualified Iraqis Party" is a slate of defectors from the Shia Islamic Coalition. Al-Dabagh, who is known to have a strong relationship with the Hawza in Najaf, told poloffs that four days previously Ayatollah Sistani issued an indirect blessing of the Shia Alliance and other parties acceptable to the Shia leadership, including al-Dabagh's. He complained about the Shia Alliance's intimidation of other Shia candidates, its misuse of Sistani images (e.g., picture on posters), and its effort to communicate to Iraqis that Sistani has blessed the Alliance list. Al-Dabagh said he opposed such tactics, adding that he had declined opportunities -- for the present -- to put Sistani's image on his campaign material. Al-Dabagh said he did not expect Sistani to say anything further about the elections.

3. (C) Al-Dabagh predicted that the Shia Alliance will get the majority of seats in the elections for the Council of Representatives. However, he told poloffs that it will be impossible for the Shia Alliance to govern with just the Kurds and that Sunni participation will be required. He speculated that PM Jafari and SCIRI head Abdul Aziz al-Hakim will not be able to work together in the next government for longer than one year. He added that the future government will need to create jobs and criticized the proposed 2006 Iraqi budget for only creating 250,000 jobs. He highlighted the need for a vibrant private sector.

4. (C) Al-Dabagh described the Shia Alliance as too pro-Iranian. He described this as destructive because the Iraqi Shias should be seen as Iraqis, not as "a shadow of Iran." He acknowledged that Iraq should have neighborly relations with Iran, but added that Iraq should not be paying for Iran's problems with the United States (referring to Iranian support for Syria, etc.). He added that Iran is financing Dawa and the Sadrist and controls several newspapers in Iraq. (COMMENT: Al-Dabagh denied that his party has any links to Iran. END COMMENT)

5. (C) Al-Dabagh, who speaks fluent Farsi from his 26 years in Dubai and has extensive business ties to Iran, believes that the Shia Alliance is using religion in a way that is harmful to Iraq. He noted with concern Sunni Arab perceptions of a Shia attempt to establish a theocratic state, despite Sistani's wishes to the contrary.

6. (C) Al-Dabagh stressed that Moqtada al-Sadr "is a political reality," who has the capacity to "destroy much of the south." Al-Dabagh added that Moqtada will have a share of seats within and outside the Shia Alliance so he "must be dealt with in a smart way." When asked for clarification, al-Dabagh said the other Iraqi leaders and the United States need to accommodate Moqtada, who "wants others to recognize him." Al-Dabagh added that Moqtada is not really interested in throwing out the Coalition, "he just wants to be treated as a real leader." Moqtada knows that "the political process is much cheaper than fighting." He made several references to his close relationship with al-Sadr, saying that al-Sadr tried to pressure him into remaining in the Alliance.

7. (C) Al-Dabagh said that since June, Moqtada has been playing his cards strategically. He noted a meeting organized by Moqtada November 30 in Najaf with various Shia groups designed to issue a statement asking for troop withdrawal, recognition of the insurgency, release of all Iraqi prisoners, and a formal rejection of Israel. He said that Moqtada would expand his outreach to include Sunnis as well.

SATTERFIELD